

PETER IN ROME?

A REVIEW OF THE LITERARY RECORD IN THE
LIGHT OF SCRIPTURAL EVIDENCE

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CHAPTER I Introduction

The Problem of the Study

Few theological questions loom as important to Christianity in the West as that of the primacy of Rome as established by claims to the labors, episcopacy, death, and burial of the Apostle Peter at that city. According to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*:

The significance of Rome lies primarily in the fact that it is the city of the pope. The Bishop of Rome, as *the successor of St. Peter*, is the Vicar of Christ on earth and visible head of the Catholic Church. Rome is consequently the center of unity in belief, the source of ecclesiastical jurisdiction, and the seat of the supreme authority which can bind by its enactments the faithful throughout the world. The Diocese of Rome is known as the “*See of Peter*,” the “*Apostolic See*,” the Holy Roman Church, the “*Holy See*” — titles which indicate its unique position in Christendom and suggest the origin of its pre-eminence. [U. Benigni, “*Rome*,” *Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911), XIII, p. 164.] (Emphasis mine throughout.)

This is how the Catholic Church sets forth the authority of its ruling city. As to the authenticity of its claims that Rome is the “*See of Peter*,” they further state:

It is an *indisputably established historical fact* that St. Peter labored in Rome during the last portion of his life, and there ended his earthly course by martyrdom . . . *The essential fact is that Peter died at Rome: this constitutes the historical foundation of the claim of the Bishops of Rome to the Apostolic Primacy of Peter.* [*ibid.*, Vol. XIII, p. 748.]

Clearly the importance of the study of Peter at Rome, of his last acts, and whether or not he died at Rome cannot be overstated. It is perhaps the most important problem of the Christian Church. It is also one of the most ancient, having been probed and queried by scholars and theologians since even before the Protestant Reformation.

Cullmann, in a section devoted to the *History of the Debate Whether Peter Resided in Rome*, notes that:

. . . the question was first raised in the Middle Ages by Christians for whom the Bible was the sole norm, the Waldensians. We can understand why it was they who did so. As we have seen, the New Testament nowhere tells us that Peter came to the chief city of the Empire and stayed there. For the Waldensians, the silence of the Bible was quite decisive. [Oscar Cullmann, *Peter — Disciple, Apostle, Martyr* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1953), p. 71.]

He then traces the debate from Luther to the Post-World War II era citing such notable Catholic and Protestant scholars as Eichhorn, Baur of Tubingen, Renan,

Harnack, Lietzmann, Heussi, and many others. The history of the argument takes over seven pages to recount. [*Ibid.*, pp. 70-77.]

In a more recent work, O'Connor summarizes the history into five pages, noting that even Catholic scholars such as Duchesne have expressed doubts about some of the particulars of Peter's sojourn at Rome — namely, that he went there in the time of Claudius (circa 42 A.D.). [Daniel Wm. O'Connor, *Peter in Rome* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), p. 4.] And O'Connor, as a modern Catholic theologian, does not fail to note the importance of the study. He writes in his introduction:

It is not curiosity concerning the latter part of Peter's life, his death and his burial, that prompts this work. . . . One point of importance in the problem lies in the relationship which exists between the coming of Peter to Rome, his martyrdom and burial there, and *the question of the supremacy of the Roman See and the Roman Pontiff*. [*Ibid.*, p. xiii.]

If indeed the Apostle Peter conducted a considerable part of his later ministry at Rome and was martyred there, then the Catholic Church can make impressive claims to the historic foundation of the Roman Church. If he did *not* long minister there, and if there is *no positive proof* of his death and burial at Rome, then these claims are invalid and the historical grounds for the establishment and pre-eminence of the Roman Church must be called into serious question. Thus the implications of this centuries-old question have always been considerable and weighty.

The Purpose of the Study

It will be the purpose of this study to show that there is *no positive proof linking the Apostle Peter to the City of Rome* — neither in his establishment of, and ministry to the Roman Church, nor in the later literary evidence of legends and scanty records regarding his ministry and death. His “twenty-five year episcopate” can and will be shown to be an easily disproved theory. Traditions surrounding his death and burial will be seen for the vague and often contradictory legends that they are.

What we will see emerge is just the opposite of what one might have reason to expect. Instead of clear, impressive, and oft-repeated testimony of the earliest church historians, dwindling with the passage of long time to scanty references dimmed by antiquity, we find that the *earliest records* — those closest to the actual events — *are the most vague, uncertain, and sparse*, but that out of these scant notices *evolves* a constantly growing, increasingly precise and definite tradition that sharpens its clarity and certainty with the passing of time! The net result is that the historians of the fourth century speak with absolute certainty on matters that were unknown or unrecorded by the writers of the first and second!

The Method of Study

The method of the study will be to study available literary evidence in chronological order beginning with the Biblical record, on through the early writers and historians of the first through fourth centuries, both Greek and Latin. The Catholic claim is that:

St. Peter's residence and death in Rome are established *beyond*

contention as historical facts by a series of distinct testimonies extending from the end of the first to the end of the second centuries, and issuing from several lands. [J.P. Kirsch, "Peter," *Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911), XI, p. 748.]

We will carefully and in detail re-examine those very testimonies to see if they indeed answer the question beyond contention, or, if they do not indeed raise considerable questions and even suggest negative answers about Peter *and Rome*.

CHAPTER II The Biblical Record

Before launching into a critical study of the post-apostolic record, we need to examine first the Biblical account of the movements of the Apostle Peter. *We need to ask: What would we conclude about Peter at Rome if we had only the New Testament?*

In attempting to reconstruct the later history of the Apostle Peter, Hastings notes that:

Except the testimony of I Peter, we have in the New Testament no clear evidence as to the Apostle's movements after St. Paul's notice in Galatians 2. What evidence the New Testament supplies as to later times is *negative*. [James Hastings, *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. IX (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1917), p. 777.]

That is to say, it tells us only where Peter was not (with one notable exception) — and where he was *not*, from the New Testament account alone, was most certainly Rome.

Two Different Commissions

In the famous encounter of Paul and Peter at Antioch found in **Galatians 2**, we find the last notice of where Peter was, before his residence at "Babylon" mentioned in **I Peter 5:13**. The time would have been in the early 50s A.D., around the time of the Jerusalem Conference of Acts 15. [W. L. Conybeare and J. S. Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul* (Grand Rapids: Wm. R. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959), pp. 177, 833.] We also find there an important guiding principle as to the Apostolic endeavors of those two dynamic leaders of the early Church.

Paul delineates the respective responsibilities of the two Apostles by writing "the gospel of the *uncircumcision* was committed unto me, as the gospel of the *circumcision* was unto Peter" (**Gal. 2:7**). The student of the life of Peter cannot help but be struck by the remarkable lack of understanding of this God-given commission on the part of many writers. It is so often entirely overlooked and ignored as if it had no relevance in determining Peter's ministry or travels.

The **Book of Acts** confirms that Paul did fulfill his commission to the Gentiles from Syrian Antioch to Rome itself. The obvious reason that we do not read anything about the Apostle Peter's ministry after **Acts 13**, is that he, too, was fulfilling his ministry — to

the circumcised Israelites — outside the regions prescribed by Luke’s account — usually outside the boundaries of the Roman Empire.

Thus from the scriptural commission of Peter as revealed in **Galatians 2**, we should not expect to find him laboring for, as some early historians had it, “25 years” of his later ministry within the clear domain of the Apostle to the circumcision.

No Peter in Romans

Chronologically, the next weight of evidence is nothing less than the entire **Book of Romans** written in the mid-fifties A.D. [Theodor Zahn, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1953), Vol. 1, p. 434.] Taken in part, or as a whole, it becomes incontrovertible evidence that Peter was not at Rome at the time of its writing — and that he had not been there by the time Paul wrote.

Most significantly, while over two dozen persons are either saluted or mentioned in passing, Peter is *nowhere named* in the entire **sixteen** chapters of **Romans**, which cannot be explained either by oversight or insult. He simply was not there.

Moreover, the Church had not yet been “established,” for Paul expresses the desire in **Romans 1:17** to do so by imparting to them “some spiritual gift.” It is inconceivable that Peter could have been at Rome and the Church not have been “established” in any sense of that word.

But the absolute proof that Rome did not lie within Peter’s jurisdiction, and was not “Peter’s See,” lies in **Romans 15:20**: “Yea, so have I strived to preach the gospel, *not* where Christ was named, *lest I should build upon another man’s foundation.*” Clearly Peter had not founded the Roman Church — a fact we will see totally forgotten and ignored by later ecclesiastical historians — or Paul would have been attempting to “build on his foundation.”

Furthermore, we must consider **II Corinthians 10:13-15**. If Paul refused to “boast of things without our measure” or “to stretch ourselves beyond our measure” (that is, jurisdiction or “line” of authority, see KJV margin), or “of other men’s labours,” we can be very certain that Rome was clearly within Paul’s, *not Peter’s*, area of responsibility and authority, and that Peter had not labored there — at least not up to the time **Romans** was written. And since the time of its writing was in the mid-fifties A.D., this would at the very least rule out any long stay of twenty or twenty-five years as was later claimed by some notable historians including Eusebius.

And if Paul would have so dutifully held to his line or authority, circumspectly avoiding intrusion into another man’s labors, could we not be equally certain that Peter would have held to the same rule? Therefore, if God had, as we have already seen, given Paul the first opportunity to establish the fledgling Roman congregation, and had put the capital of the Gentile world squarely within the commission of the Apostle to the Gentiles, why should we later expect to find Peter laboring there?

Was it not *Paul* who said, “I must also see Rome” (**Acts 19:21**)? Was it not *Paul* who was told “Thou must bear witness also at Rome” (**Acts 23:11**)? Where is there the slightest clue in the Scriptures that he would share this responsibility with Peter, the Apostle to the circumcision?

The Roman Imprisonments and Epistles

Indeed, Paul did go to Rome after appealing to Caesar as recorded in **Acts 28** and was there received, *not* by his fellow Apostle, but by “the captain of the guard” (**vs. 16**).

What follows is his first Roman imprisonment in the early 60s A.D., certainly before Nero's persecution beginning in 64. During this time Paul, the "ambassador in bonds," is inspired to write the Prison Epistles — Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon, a total of four books, 15 chapters, 379 verses, but *not one mention of the Apostle Peter*, whom Catholic tradition would have at the height of his labors at Rome at that time.

How much stock can we put in the later writers who ignore facts such as these in concluding Rome was "the See of Peter"?

Then for a brief time, Paul is released, only to be arrested "as an evil doer" (**II Tim. 4:9**), and returned to Rome for his second and final imprisonment in the middle or late 60s. (It is not my purpose to establish an exact chronology.) From **II Timothy** we receive the last words of Paul on his condition, and our last opportunity to find the Apostle Peter at his side, but instead we read, "*Only Luke is with me*" (**II Tim. 4:11**).

Note carefully that this is *not* just an "argument from silence," which some would wrongly claim is inconclusive in the case of Acts, Romans, and the Prison Epistles. This is a clear *statement of denial* that Peter was with Paul, and certainly the same city would be considered "with" him.

And what of the others? "*No man stood with me, but all men forsook me.*" Are we to believe that this includes *Peter*? Hardly. Even those who would seek to show that Peter was at Rome on other occasions, are forced to admit that he must have been absent during Paul's final days in that city. And to those who would thus accommodate their theories to fit the facts, we ask *why* would Peter have left his fellow Apostle in his hour of need. And what more important duty called him away at that critical hour?

Whatever it was must not have taken very long, for as we shall see, the tradition that evolves in later years has them dying together under Nero *at Rome on the same day!* How much can credulity be stretched? Perhaps we can see the importance of studying the inspired Biblical record before we critically examine the uninspired testimony that followed.

Even though Hastings would like to follow the later "streams of evidence," he is forced to admit:

This concurrence of apparently independent testimony becomes much more impressive when it is remembered that *the New Testament supplies nothing which could give rise to a legend that St. Peter visited Rome*. On the contrary, the narrative of the Acts and the notices in St. Paul's later Epistles seem to make such a visit *improbable*. [Hastings, *op. cit.*, p. 77.]

"Improbable," indeed! That Peter would have: (1) neglected his own commission to the circumcision to devote long years to the Roman Gentiles; (2) far overstepped his own line of authority and in so doing usurped that of the Apostle Paul; (3) gone unmentioned in the entire last half of Acts and in all of the Prison Epistles including **II Timothy**; and (4) forsaken his "beloved brother Paul" (**II Pet. 3:15**) in his hour of trial at Rome, this writer finds more than "improbable," but spiritually and morally *impossible* for an Apostle of God, and totally contrary to the internal evidence of the New Testament!

CHAPTER III Where Peter Was

In closing his first epistle, Peter remarks, “The church that is at Babylon, elected together with you, saluteth you” (I Pet. 5:13). Instead of theorizing that Peter was at Rome for many long years managing somehow to escape everyone’s attention, why do we not simply accept the testimony of Peter himself that he was at Babylon? There is not the slightest reason not to do so despite the controversy on this point that has raged for centuries. Michaelis observes:

Commentators do not agree in regard to the meaning of the word Babylon, some taking it in its literal and proper sense, others giving it a figurative and mystical interpretation. Among the advocates for the latter sense, have been men of such learning and abilities, that I was misled by their authority in the younger part of my life to subscribe to it: *but at present, as I have more impartially examined the question, it appears to me very extraordinary* that, when an Apostle dates his epistle from Babylon, it should even occur to any commentator to ascribe to this work a mystical meaning, instead of taking it in its literal and proper sense. [Michaelis, as quoted by Adam Clarke, *Clarke’s Commentary* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, n.d., Vol. VI, p. 838.)]

As for those who would give this clear reference to his location a mystical interpretation as John later did in the 90s A.D., applying it to Rome, let us remember that Peter was writing in an epistle of Christian living exhortations, not deep prophetic symbolism, long before that allegorical meaning was understood.

Let us also recall the nature of Peter — that he was a practical man not given to allegories and mysteries in any of his preaching or writing and certainly would not resort to such language in the simple and straightforward close of a letter.

Babylon Did Exist!

Some have contended that Babylon had ceased to exist by the Christian era, but this runs contrary to well-established historical fact. Josephus, the notable Jewish historian who lived in the same time as Peter, makes frequent clear references to it in his Antiquities. Speaking of the high priest in the time of Herod (30s B.C.), he writes:

When Hyrcanus was brought into Parthia, the King Phraates . . . gave him a habitation *at Babylon*, where there were *Jews in great numbers*. These Jews honored Hyrcanus as their high priest and king, as did all the Jewish nation that dwelt as far as *Euphrates*. [William Winston, (translator), *The Life and Works of Josephus*, 15, 2, 2 (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, n.d., p. 445.)]

Notice what substantial facts we have here. First, we may be absolutely certain that *Josephus* was not speaking in an allegorical sense for he links this Babylon to the Euphrates, the site of ancient Babylon. Next, he tell us that there were “Jews in great numbers” at Babylon, giving us the logical reason why Peter, the Apostle *to the*

circumcision, was at Babylon — fulfilling his ministry and God-given commission.

Current archeological and historical research gives us an accurate estimate of what Josephus meant by “great number” of Jews in the Babylonian region. Neusner in his recent work, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia*, gives an estimate of the Jewish population of Babylon during the Sasanian period about a century after the dates of our study.

J. Beloch holds that Babylonia and Susiana held from six to eight million people, basing his estimate on a population density of 46 to 60 per kilometer. If the Jews constituted a tenth to an eighth of the local population, and that would be a conservative figure, then according to Beloch’s figures, there should have been from 600,000 to a million Jews in Babylonia and the surrounding territories. [Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia* (Leiden: E. L. Ball, 1966, p. 246.)

He concludes the section by stating, “Hence the Jewish population of Sasanian Babylonia may have been approximately 860,000 which would be regarded as a conservative estimate. [*ibid.*, p. 250.]

Those who would have Peter in Rome have made mention of the fact that the Jewish colony of Rome, numbering at best a few tens of thousands, justified the presence of the Apostle of the circumcision. How weak that argument now appears in light of modern evidence proving that his Israelitish brethren *in Babylon* numbered about a million by conservative estimate!

Biblical Evidence or Christian Tradition?

In light of the evidence, how can argument be made against Peter’s being at literal, not mystical, Babylon? There is no proof to the contrary, and the Biblical facts and evidence overwhelmingly support it. Still, there is a stubborn resistance to accept the obvious. Note Cullmann’s line of reasoning:

It must be said, however, that it is not completely certain that the expression must here be understood in a figurative way. We cannot fully exclude the possibility that the long-famous ancient Mesopotamian city of Babylon was really meant. We know from Josephus and from Philo that this place was still inhabited in the New Testament period . . . So it has actually been assumed that on one of his missionary journeys Peter came to Babylon in Mesopotamia, or if not into the city itself, at least into the region of Babylonia, and wrote our letter from there. One cannot exclude this possibility. Nevertheless, it is not probable, and is *not supported by later Christian tradition*, which knows nothing of a missionary work of Peter in three regions. [Oscar Cullmann, *Peter — Disciple, Apostle, Martyr* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1953), pp. 84-85.]

Let us analyze a bit further those statements. First, the possibility of a journey by Peter to the ancient city of Babylon cannot be ruled out as a clear possibility by this modern author, and certainly cannot be disproved. But he feels it would have been “improbable.” *Why* should it be *improbable* that the Apostle to the circumcision would

journey to a known center of the Jews? It is not at all improbable when one remembers his commission.

But the reason the above author gives for its improbability is most interesting — not that it goes contrary to Biblical evidence or injunction, for it does not. It fits the scriptural account perfectly, but it is not supported by “later Christian tradition” which “knows nothing” of any such work by Peter.

It seems that some would hold that the “argument from silence” cannot be used in the case of Acts, Romans, and all of the Prison Epistles as proof that Peter was not at Rome, but they would like to use just such an argument from silence of far more scanty and suspicious “later Christian tradition” from the Parthian regions to prove that Peter was not at Babylon! And note that such inconsistent argument is the *only* “proof” to the contrary that is given. He gives us no real grounds for denying the logical inference that when Peter said Babylon he *meant* Babylon.

A Hostile Frontier — Barrier to Communication

Finally, we should further consider a few facts about this Parthian Kingdom from which Peter wrote. It is a little known and oft-overlooked fact of history that Parthia was a formidable military power that warred with the Roman Empire at this very time — the 60s A.D. — and successfully withstood the Roman generals sent by Nero to subdue it. Rome had to settle with “peace without conquest” in 62 after a thorough defeat at Rhandaia. [William L. Langer, *An Encyclopedia of World History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962), p. 106.]

What this means to our study is that a hostile frontier separated the evangelistic territories of Peter and Paul, and that travel and communication no doubt posed real difficulties. This would readily account for why we read so little — virtually nothing — of Peter’s later ministry, because he was outside the Roman Empire while Paul and the first historian of the Church, Luke, were within its bounds.

The fact that the Scriptures are otherwise silent about Peter’s evangelistic work in the Parthian Kingdom proves nothing. In **Titus 1:5**, Paul mentions that he made an otherwise unrecorded visit to Crete, but we do not assume for a moment that because it is the only reference we have of that visit, that Paul really never was at Crete, that Crete ceased to exist, or that he meant spiritual, allegorical, or mystical Crete. Let us be equally willing to believe that when Peter said he was with the Church “at Babylon,” that he was indeed in that Parthian center of dispersed Jews, where he had every reason to be fulfilling his God-given commission, and *not at Rome*.

CHAPTER IV

The First Century — Clement Of Rome And Ignatius

Having examined the Biblical record regarding the likelihood of Peter’s sojourn at Rome, we turn now to the literary evidence with surprising results. While a close study of the New Testament does nothing to establish Peter’s residence at the Roman capital, and in fact leads to the opposite conclusion, the writings of the Ante-Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers lead with increasing certainty to the conclusions that Peter came to Rome at an early date (in the reign of Claudius), that he conducted his ministry there for twenty-five years, and that he died there in Rome, under Nero, *on the same day* as the Apostle Paul.

Let us now examine these writings as they occur in chronological order and see how it is that these conclusions came to be drawn by the early writer.

Clement of Rome

The first writer we must consider, closest in time to the actual events and in many ways the most trustworthy, is Clement of Rome, who wrote toward the close of the first century. It is probable that this is the same Clement mentioned by the Apostle Paul in **Philippians 4:3** and that he later became the presbyter of the Roman Church. His *First Epistle to the Corinthians* has a note of truth and accuracy wanting in most, if not all, of the other post-canonical writers.

It is in the fifth chapter of his letter that he makes mention of the deaths of the Apostles Peter and Paul in this manner:

But not to dwell upon ancient examples, let us come to the most recent spiritual heroes. Let us take the noble examples furnished in our own generation. Through envy and jealousy, the greatest and most righteous pillars [of the Church, ed. note] have been persecuted and put to death. Let us set before our eyes the illustrious Apostles. *Peter, through unrighteous envy, endured not one or two, but numerous labours; and when he had at length suffered martyrdom, departed to the place of glory due to him.* Owing to envy, Paul also obtained the reward of patient endurance, after being seven times thrown into captivity, compelled to flee, and stoned. After preaching both in the east and west, he gained the illustrious reputation due to his faith, having taught righteousness to the whole world, and come to the extreme limit of the west, and suffered martyrdom under the prefects. Thus was he removed from the world, and went into the holy place, having proved himself a striking example of patience. [Clement of Rome, "The First Epistle to the Corinthians." American ed. by A. Cleveland Coxe (Vol. 1, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950, p. 6), Chap. 5.]

It may come as a surprise to some readers to learn that this is, almost without exception, the first evidence given that Peter died at Rome! The usual inference is that we find in this passage reference made to the death of both Apostles by someone who is writing from Rome, thus associating their deaths with that city.

But let us notice carefully what the passage does and does not say. It does state that:

1. Peter died a martyr.
2. Paul likewise died a martyr "under the prefects."

These prefects, or Roman governors, are thought by some to be Tigellinus and Sabinus in the last year of Nero. Others see the use of the term as general, denoting simply the witness born before the rulers of the earth. [*ibid.*]

The passage does *not*:

1. Make any reference to *Rome*
2. Make mention of *Nero*
3. Attempt to *date* Peter's death, or
4. Describe the *manner* in which Peter died.

Clement's testimony is a simple statement that records the fact that Peter died a martyr's death, something that Jesus Himself predicted in **John 21:18**. As such, the statement is believable and not in conflict with any Bible verse or principle. It can be accepted in its entirety for what it says and does not say.

Ignatius

We cannot speak so kindly of Ignatius, the Bishop of Antioch, who lived in the last third of the first century and whose martyrdom at Rome is usually given about 110 A.D. Besides having what must be the greatest martyr complex ever recorded — his writings are an amplified death wish — he attacks Sabbath-keeping, the “Jewish law,” and Judaizing.

I quote below most of chapter four of his *Epistle to the Romans* to give the flavor of the passage which mentions Peter and Paul.

Suffer me to become food for the wild beasts, through whose instrumentality it will be granted me to attain to God. I am the wheat of God, and let me be ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of Christ. Rather entice the wild beasts, that they may become my tomb, and may leave nothing of my body; so that when I have fallen asleep [in death, ed. note], I may be no trouble to any one. Then shall I truly be a disciple of Christ, when the world shall not see so much as my body. Entreat Christ for me, that by these instruments I may be found a sacrifice [to God, ed. note]. *I do not, as Peter and Paul, issue commandments unto you. They were Apostles; I am but a condemned man: they were free, while I am, even until now, a servant. But when I suffer, I shall be the freedman of Jesus, and shall rise again emancipated in Him. And now, being a prisoner, I learn not to desire anything worldly or vain.* [Ignatius, “Epistle to the Romans,” American ed. by A. Cleveland Coxe (Vol. I, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950; p. 75), Chap. 4.]

Clearly, he writes after the deaths of the two Apostles (a fact supported by history), but other than that there can be little more than speculation. The implication is that Peter and Paul gave the Romans to which he wrote commands in a special manner, thus linking Peter to the Roman Church, but in fact, the statement could be made of any of the New Testament Churches, for through their writings Peter and Paul as Apostles gave commands to all of them.

Once again, we must note that we do *not* find in this early record *any* direct mention of Rome, Nero, the time, place, or manner of Peter's ministry or death. It is at best a passing reference to the two leading Apostles sometime after their deaths.

And as scanty and obscure as these two passages may be, they comprise the sum

total of the written, extra-Biblical evidence within the first century of the actual events of the lives and deaths of the Apostles. Were we acquainted only with the Biblical record and these two bits of evidence, we would hardly imagine the sweeping and detailed conclusions that would be drawn by the later writers.

CHAPTER V

The Second Century— Irenaeus, Dionysius, And Clement Of Alexandria

In tracing the history of the Church and its writers, one can hardly move from the first century and the Apostolic era into the earliest records of the second century without comment. It was no less an historian than Gibbon who was forced to write, "The scanty and suspicious materials of ecclesiastical history seldom enable us to dispel the dark cloud that hangs over the first age of the Church." [Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: The Modern Library, n. ed., Vol. I, p. 382.) And Hurlbut complains:

For fifty years after St. Paul's life a curtain hangs over the Church, through which we strive vainly to look; and when at last it rises, about 120 A.D., with the writings of the earliest church-father, we find a church in many aspects very different from that in the days of St. Peter and St. Paul. [Jesse Lyman Hurlbut, *The Story of the Christian Church* (Philadelphia: The John C. Winston Company, 1954), p. 41.]

It is for this reason that some have termed the period from 70 to 170 A.D., "The Lost Century," for we indeed know very little about this period except, as Hurlbut noted, that many changes took place which greatly modified the Apostolic Church of the first century. We will see these changes reflected in the literature of those who wrote after the curtain once again ascended revealing the church and the beliefs of that later period.

Irenaeus

Among the earliest of the second century writers who mentions Peter and Rome is Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon, whose writing are dated about 170 A.D.

Writing *Against Heresies*, he states:

Since, however, it would be very tedious in such a volume as this, to reckon up the successions of all the Churches, we do put to confusion all those who, in whatever manner, whether by an evil self-pleasing, or vainglory, or by blindness and perverse opinion, assemble in unauthorized meetings; [we do this, I say, ed. note] by indicating that tradition derived from the Apostles, *of the very great, the very ancient, and universally known Church founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious Apostles, Peter and Paul*; as also [(by pointing out), ed. note] the faith preached to men, which comes down to our time by means of the successions of the bishops. For it is a matter of necessity that every Church should agree with this Church, on account of its preeminent authority, that is, the faithful everywhere, inasmuch as the Apostolical tradition has

been preserved continuously by those [(faithful men), ed. note] who exist everywhere. [Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," American ed. by A. Cleveland Coxe (Vol. I, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950; pp. 415-416), 3, 3, 2.]

Here we see the beginning of attempts to establish the authority and importance of the Roman church by the claim that it was "founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious Apostles." We have already covered in detail not only the complete absence of Biblical proof, but the clear denial from the Scriptures that Peter founded or established the Roman congregation. When Paul first wrote to it in 55 A.D., it was *not* yet "established" (**Rom. 1:11**), and we have his claim that he "strived to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build upon another man's foundation" (**Rom. 15:20**). So throughout the entire record until Paul's death at Rome, there is *nothing* to confirm Irenaeus' bald assertion that the church at Rome was "founded and organized" by Peter and Paul.

But let us observe again, that we still have no mention of Peter's death at Rome under Nero — only for the first time in our study the suggestion that Peter helped found the church at Rome.

Dionysius of Corinth

At this same time (circa 170), we have recorded by Eusebius (and only preserved by him) the testimony of Dionysius of Corinth in these words:

You have thus by such an admonition bound together the planting of Peter and of Paul at Rome and Corinth. For both of them planted and likewise taught us in our Corinth. And they taught together in like manner in Italy and suffered martyrdom at the same time. [Eusebius, *Church History*, trans. by Arthur C. McGiffert (Vol. I, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1952; p. 130) 2, 25, 8.]

So to Irenaeus' claim that Peter founded the Roman church, Dionysius adds that he likewise "planted" and "taught" the Corinthians! How is it that Luke entirely overlooks that noteworthy fact in the Book of The Acts of the Apostles?

And what are we to make of Paul's claim to the Corinthians, "I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase" (**I Cor. 3:6**)? Are we to conclude that Paul deliberately ignores the work of his fellow Apostle at Corinth? He adds in the fourth chapter and fifteenth verse, "For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have ye not many fathers: for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel." Again no mention of Peter at Corinth — unless one wishes to relegate him to the role of a mere instructor of the Corinthians.

And here we learn for the first time that Peter and Paul were martyred *at the same time* after teaching *together* in Italy. Note that not a shred of proof is given to back these impressive claims that we are asked to accept only on the word of an obscure Corinthian bishop long after a stormy and spiritually degenerative history of that same church. Strangely, these passages are cited as proof, but they go *completely unproved*.

No attempt is made by Eusebius, or any ecclesiastical historian since, to reconcile these claims with the New Testament record, for that would be an impossibility. Are the book of Acts and The Epistles to the Corinthians to be used as proof that Peter assisted Paul in planting Corinth? And are the Prison Epistles and the Pastoral Letters to be cited as substantiation that Peter and Paul “taught together in like manner in Italy”?

And if these appear as the preposterous claims they are, then why should we feel obliged to accept that Peter and Paul “suffered martyrdom at the same time”?

These are not the words of men speaking the truth according to the inspired word of God, but men of the same mind who wrote the spurious and apocryphal Gospels and Acts of Peter and Paul and the many other apocryphal legends about Peter and Simon Magus that began to be circulated widely after about 150 A.D.

Readers familiar with the Clementine literature, and the apocryphal Gospels, and Acts, will recall that there we find the elaborate and fanciful fables of Peter and Simon Magus at Rome complete with lengthy, detailed conversations between the two arch-rivals, building up to the inevitable climax and display of miracle-working power in which the Magician loses his life. Paul is often present in the scenarios, but always upstaged by Peter. Even Nero is assigned impressive lines and is seen as a seeker of truth. (See especially *The Acts of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul*.)

Such literature flourished in the latter half of the second century, and was later noted and disclaimed by Eusebius. [*ibid.*, (Vol. I, pp. 133-134), 3, 3, 2.] One wonders what were the *motives* of those who devised such spurious legends. Were they intent on inventing such fables to find Peter in Rome *at any cost*? Was it necessary to confuse the whole issue thoroughly in order to prevent the discovery of only *one* pseudo-Peter at Rome? These are searching questions that probably cannot be answered at the present time, but the elaborate lengths to which the apocryphal literature goes — all the same direction — cannot help but raise the question of motive.

Another question concerns the degree to which such legends influenced later writers. Peter and Paul before Nero at Rome — that is the stuff the apocryphal legends were made of. Certainly the church historians could not claim they were inspired or to be regarded as canon, but how much of their content did they absorb and put stock in? We know that the Peter-in-Rome theories did not get their start in the Bible. Did they allow, indeed, were some quite *willing* to let the apocryphal works *color their thinking*? It is certainly worth noting that it is *after* their circulation in the latter half of the second century, that the ideas contained therein began to appear.

Clement of Alexandria

From fragments of *Adumbrations* or *Comments* by Clement of Alexandria on the General Epistles, we have preserved through a Latin translation by Cassiodorus a brief record of Peter at Rome by the Alexandrian Clement. We should assign this writing to late in the second century or just after the turn of the third century.

Commenting on **I Peter 5:13**, Clement writes:

“Marcus, my son, saluteth you.” Mark, the follower of Peter, while Peter publicly preached the Gospel at Rome before some of Caesar’s equites, and adduced many testimonies to Christ, in order that thereby they might be able to commit to memory what was spoken, of what was spoken by Peter, wrote entirely what is called the Gospel according to Mark. [Clement of Alexandria, *Fragments*, trans. by

William Wilson (Vol. II. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1951; p. 573), Chap. 1.]

Unlike the statements of Irenaeus and Dionysius, Clement of Alexandria makes no unusual claims, only suggesting that at some time Peter preached publicly at Rome before high-ranking Roman citizens. This statement need present no difficulty unless one is determined to prove that Peter was *never* at Rome. But it certainly could not be used to prove that Peter had a long episcopate there, that he died there under Nero, on the same day as Paul, etc.

The Development of Tradition

It seems very fitting to conclude this chapter with advice and counsel from no less a scholar than Oscar Cullmann on the subject of these later texts, namely those after the middle of the second century:

On the other hand, the chief value for historical study of these late texts, which now in increasing number assert that Peter was in Rome and became a martyr there, concerns only the history of dogma; they attest the development of the tradition. In theory the possibility cannot be excluded that perhaps here and there the basis of the tradition is a good earlier source which we no longer possess. Yet even if this is so, *we must be fundamentally skeptical toward these later texts*, when we see how in this very period *the development of Christian legend flourishes* and how it seeks to fill out the gaps in the New Testament narrative. *Where, in addition, contradictions between these texts and the early sources appear, their trustworthiness must be challenged from the start.* With this reserve, however, it is interesting to get acquainted with at least the earliest of these witnesses, those of the second and third centuries. [Oscar Cullmann, *Peter — Disciple, Apostle, Martyr*, trans. Floyd V. Filson (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1953), p. 115.]

It is this *development of tradition and Christian legend at the expense of Biblical truth and historical accuracy*, that this author seeks to call special attention to in this thesis. We cannot now reconstruct with certainty the events of the first century removed as we are from them by nearly two millenniums, but we can be, as he suggests, “fundamentally skeptical” in our approach, especially when we see contradictions of revealed truths and conflicting versions of the same story.

Further, we must bear in mind that authors then as now did not write without *motives*. Fabulous tales of the Apostles were not written as children’s bedtime stories, nor simply with a warm, nostalgic glow of earlier, cherished events. They were written, we can be sure, with the intent of advancing a line of thought or doctrine, of establishing authority and historicity, of persuading and convincing the readers of their writing to their conclusions. Truly, “their trustworthiness must be challenged from the start” if we are not to follow the development of so-called Christian tradition into error.

CHAPTER VI The Third Century — Tertullian And Origen

In our study of statements linking Peter with Rome by the early ecclesiastical writer, we come now to the first of the Latin writers, Tertullian, a Carthaginian whose works were done in the first quarter of the third century. It is from this Western presbyter that we receive the most definite statements about Peter's death at Rome — along with some other surprising statements.

Though he later had a falling out with the Roman clergy for his Montanist views, Tertullian was a vehement opponent of heresy and wrote profusely, especially against Marcion and Valentinus. In his *Prescription Against Heretics* we read:

Since, moreover, you are close upon Italy, you have *Rome*, from which there comes even into our own hands the very authority (of Apostles themselves). How happy is its church, on which Apostles poured forth all their doctrine along with their blood! *where Peter endures a passion like his Lord's!* where Paul wins his crown in a death like John's! where the Apostle John was first plunged, unhurt, into boiling oil, and thence remitted to his island-exile! See what fellowship has had with even (our) churches in Africa! One Lord God does she acknowledge, the Creator of the universe, and Christ Jesus (born) of the Virgin Mary, the Son of God the Creator; and the Resurrection of the flesh; the law and the prophets she unites in one volume with the writings of evangelists and Apostles, from which she drinks in her faith. This she seals with the water (of baptism), arrays with the Holy Ghost, feeds with the Eucharist, cheers with martyrdom, and against such a discipline thus (maintained) she admits no gainsayer. [Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics*, trans. by Peter Holmes (Vol. III, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1951; p. 260), I, 36.]

Here we have not only the clear inference that Peter was crucified at Rome and that Paul was there beheaded like John the Baptist, but that the Apostle John was miraculously spared from being boiled in oil at the Roman capital before being exiled to Patmos. I have included the rest of the passage to give the distinctive early Catholic flavor of it with reference to the Virgin Mary, the resurrection of the *flesh* (to unite body and soul as also Augustine later has it), the Eucharist as a sacrament, etc.

While not a Romist, Tertullian was throughout most of his life in clear sympathy with Rome in philosophy and religion. Eusebius tells us he was well acquainted with Roman laws, having his early training as a lawyer. [Eusebius, *Church History*, trans. by Arthur C. McGiffert (Vol. I, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Phillip Schaff and Henry Wace; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1952; p. 106), II, 2, 4.]

In *Scorpiace*, Tertullian writes:

And if a heretic wishes his confidence to rest upon a public record, the archives of the empire will speak, as would the stones of Jerusalem. We read the lives of the Caesars: *At Rome Nero was the first who stained with blood the rising faith. Then is Peter girt by*

another, when he is made fast to the cross. Then does Paul obtain a birth suited to Roman citizenship, when in Rome he springs to life again ennobled by martyrdom. [Tertullian, *op. cit.* (p. 258), I, 32.]

Here for the first time Nero is mentioned as persecuting Christians to the death. But note that Tertullian does not specifically make Nero responsible for Peter's death, which he puts before Paul's, though the Biblical evidence, especially from **II Peter**, would seem to be the reverse. (Peter seems to be summing up Paul's writings when he makes mention of "all his epistles" in **II Peter 3:16**.)

A final and most enigmatic passage from Tertullian in *Against Heretics* gives us the information that Peter ordained Clement, the third bishop of Rome:

But if there be any (heresies) which are bold enough to plant themselves in the midst of the Apostolic age, that they may thereby seem to have been handed down by the Apostles, because they existed in the time of the Apostles, we can say: Let them produce the original records of their churches; let them unfold the roll of their bishops, running down in due succession from the beginning in such a manner that (that first bishop of theirs), ed. note bishop shall be able to show for his ordainer and predecessor some one of the Apostles or of Apostolic men — a man, moreover, who continued steadfast with the Apostles. For this is the manner in which the Apostolic Churches transmit their registers: as the Church of Smyrna, which records that Polycarp was placed therein by John; as also the Church of Rome, *which makes Clement to have been ordained in like manner by Peter.* [*Ibid.*]

The passage raises more questions than it answers. We know from Irenaeus that Linus and Anacletus preceded Clement in the Roman bishopric. [Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," American ed. by A. Cleveland Coxe (Vol. I, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950; p. 416), III, 3.] Eusebius tells us that Linus was the bishop of Rome twelve years, [Eusebius, *op. cit.* (p. 416), III, 3.] and that Anacletus likewise served in that post twelve years before being succeeded by Clement. [*Ibid.*, Chap. 15.] This succession he distinctly states as occurring in the twelfth year of Domitian. [*Ibid.*] Since Domitian succeeded his brother Titus in 81, that would put Clement's ordination by Peter in 93 A.D.! Granted, the length of reigns and order of the first Roman bishops is a greatly disputed matter and subject to wide interpretation, but despite this fact, there is nothing to indicate that Linus and Anacletus died almost as soon as ordained to necessitate Clement's ordination by Peter before 68 A.D., the year of Nero.

And if Peter and Paul labored side by side at Rome until their deaths "at the same time" as Dionysius and Irenaeus assert, then why is Clement ordained by Peter *only*? Would not the Apostle of the Gentiles have joined in ordaining the Bishop of Rome?

Clearly, there are grave inconsistencies in the stories we have received from the church fathers, causing us to wonder how much of true facts they really knew as they wrote one to two centuries later. It would be utterly impossible to reconcile all their testimonies. Early Catholic fables seem interwoven with half-truths and contradictions in the continuing evolution of the stories of Rome, and the lives and deaths of the Apostles.

Origen

What little we can glean from Origen (185-254 A.D.) has been preserved for us only by Eusebius, who makes the following statement concerning Peter and Paul:

Peter appears to have preached in Pontus, Galatia, Bithynia, Cappadocia, and Asia to the Jews of the dispersion. And at last, having come to Rome, *he was crucified head-downwards; for he had requested that he might suffer in this way.* What do we need to say concerning *Paul*, who preached the Gospel of Christ from Jerusalem to Illyricum, and afterwards *suffered martyrdom in Rome under Nero?* These facts are related by Origen in the third volume of his Commentary on Genesis. [*Ibid.*, (pp. 132-133), III, 1, 2.]

Here we find the crucifixion of Peter at Rome repeated with the additional detail that it was head-downwards at his own request. Origen is the first to give this tradition though afterward it became quite common and well accepted. And while Paul is said to have been martyred by Nero, Peter's death is not attributed to him by Origen.

Thus we have yet to see any of the early writers state definitely that Nero was responsible for Peter's death, *nor did any of them attempt to date Peter's death* up through and into the third century. While the tradition had evolved as to location (Rome) and manner of death (crucifixion), it had not yet been assigned a time element before Eusebius.

CHAPTER VII

The Fourth Century — Eusebius, Lactantius, And Jerome

We come now in our study to the time when the traditions concerning Peter and Rome assume their most definite and precise form. The "Age of Shadows," as Hurlbut calls the earlier times, surprisingly becomes an age of light and clear vision into the matters which were before obscure.

It is from the beginning of this century that we have the positive statements of that most illustrious of all church historians, Eusebius. We also have Eusebius' Latin contemporary, Lactantius, and later, Jerome. We will complete our study with these writers, inasmuch as with them the evolution of tradition regarding Peter and Rome takes its final form.

Eusebius

It is Eusebius who is the first to make any attempt to date Peter's activities at Rome. Interestingly, he gives us both a beginning and ending date in general terms. The first, he tells us, was a result of Simon Magus' activities in Rome. Speaking first of Simon, Eusebius writes:

And coming to the city of Rome, by the mighty co-operation of that power which was lying in wait there, he was in a short time so successful in his undertaking that those who dwelt there honored him as a god by the erection of a statue. [Eusebius, *Church History*, trans.

by Arthur C. McGiffert (Vol. I, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1952; p. 115), II, 14, 5.]

He then introduces Peter:

But this did not last long. For immediately, during the reign of Claudius, the all-good and gracious Providence, which watches over all things, led Peter, that strongest and greatest of the Apostles, and the one who on account of his virtue was the speaker for all the others, to Rome against this great corrupter of life. He, like a noble commander of God, clad in divine armor, carried the costly merchandise of the light of the understanding from the East to those who dwelt in the West, proclaiming the light itself, and the word which brings salvation to souls, and preaching the kingdom of heaven. [*Ibid.*]

It is upon this statement that the twenty-five year episcopate of Peter is based. Jerome refines this, as we shall see, to be the second year of Claudius until the fourteenth and last of Nero — that is, from 42 to 67 A.D.

The dating of the Apostle Peter's coming to Rome has now been utterly abandoned by all scholars including even modern Catholics. Duchesne's cautious criticism earned him the censure of the Church at the turn of the century, but O'Connor's exhaustive work of 1968 clearly states that Eusebius confused Peter with Simon Magus, who no doubt did come in that year. [Daniel William O'Connor, *Peter in Rome* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), p. 10.]

Zahn is equally emphatic that it was Simon the Magician, not Simon Peter, who came at that early date:

Eusebius was not the only writer — perhaps he was not the first one — who was led by the *Acts of Peter*, through the combination of the tradition of Simon Magus' residence in Rome under Claudius with the tradition of Peter's martyrdom in Rome under Nero, to assume a long Roman Episcopate of Peter. Once it had arisen and become current, the story lost all connection with its source. [Theodor Zahn, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1953), Vol. II., p. 169.]

It is sufficient to say that no modern author would attempt to maintain Eusebius' claim as to Peter's coming to Rome in the reign of Claudius. It stems clearly from confusion with Simon Magus and cannot be justified in the light of Biblical truth or modern scholarship.

Martyrdom Under Nero

Eusebius' recording of the deaths of Peter and Paul at the hand of Nero is quoted below in its entirety in view of its importance:

When the government of Nero was now firmly established, he began

to plunge into unholy pursuits, and armed himself even against the religion of the God of the universe. To describe the greatness of his depravity does not lie within the plan of the present work. As there are many indeed that have recorded his history in most accurate narratives, every one may at his pleasure learn from them the coarseness of the man's extraordinary madness, under the influence of which, after he had accomplished the destruction of so many myriads without any reason, he ran into such blood-guiltiness that he did not spare even his nearest relatives and dearest friends, but destroyed his mother and his brothers and his wife, with very many others of his own family, as he would private and public enemies, with various kinds of deaths. But with all these things this particular in the catalogue of his crimes was still wanting, that he was the first of the emperors who showed himself an enemy of the divine religion. The Roman Tertullian is likewise a witness of this. He writes as follows: "Examine your records. There you will find that Nero was the first that persecuted this doctrine, particularly then when, after subduing all the east, he exercised his cruelty against all at Rome. We glory in having such a man the leader in our punishment. For whoever knows him can understand that nothing was condemned by Nero unless it was something of great excellence." Thus publicly announcing himself as the first among God's chief enemies, he was led on to the slaughter of the Apostles. *It is, therefore, recorded that Paul was beheaded in Rome itself, and that Peter likewise was crucified under Nero.* This account of Peter and Paul is substantiated by the fact that their names are preserved in the cemeteries of that place even to the present day. It is confirmed likewise by Caius, a member of the Church, who arose under Zephyrinus, bishop of Rome. He, in a published disputation with Proclus, the leader of the Phrygian heresy, speaks as follows concerning the places where the sacred corpses of the aforesaid Apostles are laid: "But I can show the trophies of the Apostles. For if you will go to the Vatican or to the Ostian way, you will find the trophies of those who laid the foundations of this Church." And that they both suffered martyrdom at the same time is stated by Dionysius, bishop of Corinth, in his epistle to the Romans, in the following words: "You have thus by such an admonition bound together *the planting of Peter and Paul at Rome and Corinth. For both of them planted and likewise taught us in our Corinth. And they taught together in like manner in Italy, and suffered martyrdom at the same time.*" I have quoted these things in order that the truth of the history might be still more confirmed. [Eusebius, *op. cit.* (pp. 128-130), II, 25, 1-8.]

Here for the first time we have the *assertion* that "Peter likewise was crucified under Nero." We are offered not the slightest proof, only Eusebius' word for it, and as we have already seen regarding the coming of Peter to Rome, Eusebius' word is not infallible! The more familiar one becomes with the notable historian, the more one is tempted to conclude that on occasions Eusebius *guessed* at some of his answers.

Let us also note that the quotations that follow from Caius and Dionysius have

nothing to do with Nero! Eusebius simply makes the statement on his own authority without a shred of evidence or proof.

Caius' proofs concern the cemeteries of Peter and Paul, which he terms "trophyies." What Caius meant by "trophyies" is much disputed. [Oscar Cullmann, *Peter — Disciple, Apostle, Martyr* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1953), p. 118.] The word means "victory memorials" in the Greek and could refer to simple memorials as well as graves, or the place of execution with no reference to interment.

Cullmann makes most interesting observations about the "martyr relics" in the passage below:

We should also emphasize that in the first century not the slightest trace of a cult of martyr relics can be found. The first testimony to that we find only about A.D. 150, in the Martyrdom of Polycarp. In view of the expectation of the end of the world in the immediate future, a concern for relics clearly constitutes an anachronism in thinking of the sixth decade of the first century, especially in those terrible days of persecution under Nero. [*Ibid.*, p. 119.]

How true! The preservation (indeed, adoration) of the relics of the martyrs was not a product of the first century, but that such a relic would have found its location in the garden of Nero on Vatican Hill does seem preposterous in the extreme. We are forced to conclude that this was an invention of a later time.

Beside the validity of the cemetery tradition, let us take notice of whom Eusebius quotes for proof, and whom he does *not* quote. The authors he cites are *late*. Caius is an ecclesiastical writer of the third century whose personal history is veiled in obscurity. Dionysius of Corinth is somewhat earlier, but as noted before, his conclusions reflect changes in the original story.

Eusebius was well acquainted with Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Irenaeus, and Justin Martyr (of *Rome*), but these he does not call upon for evidence. He prefers the later writers, one of whom makes mention of "trophyies" of the Apostles, both of whom assert Peter and Paul "laid the foundations" and "planted" the Church at Rome, a fact already disproved.

Obviously Eusebius was faced with the same problem of historians since his day — *the earlier authors could not be used as proof of what Eusebius sought to prove*, least of all that Peter died under Nero, or little else in practical fact.

Justin Martyr's complete silence on the whole subject of Peter and Rome is noteworthy for three reasons: (1) that he wrote prolifically *from Rome itself*; (2) that he wrote *early* in the second century (his death is given at 165); (3) that he mentions Simon Magus *three times without a single mention of Peter or a confrontation* between them, before Nero, etc. [F. J. Foakes-Jackson, *Peter: Prince of Apostles* (New York: George II. Doran Company, 1927), p. 154.]

Arguments from silence, while they may be inconclusive, do cause us to ask searching questions. One especially worth asking is: Why do we not have *more facts* from *earlier* sources *closer* to the site of the traditions? It does appear suspicious that we must wait for those further removed in time and space to fill in the details, and then with remarkable precision!

67 or 68?

But we have seen no mention of the exact year of Peter's martyrdom in our quotations from Eusebius. How is it then that he is credited with putting his death in the fourteenth year of Nero's reign? The answer, significantly, is that in his *Church History*, Eusebius makes no attempt at dating the event. He does so only in his *Chronicle*. Zahn's analysis shows great insight:

In his *Church History*, Eusebius refrains from making any more definite chronological statement, except to say that Paul's death, as well as Peter's, falls in Nero's reign. . .

He continues:

In his *Chronicum*, also, Eusebius shows that he has no more exact tradition at his command Eusebius himself knows no more than what he says, namely, that Peter and Paul died under Nero, and does not intend that 67 shall be regarded as the year preceding that Linus succeeded Peter as bishop of Rome. It was only his way of looking at the history, according to which the slaying of the Christians was the climax of Nero's crimes, that caused him in his *Chronicum* to place the persecution of the Christians at the end of that emperor's reign. [Theodor Zahn, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1953), II, pp. 77-78.]

This author feels it would be unproductive, if not impossible, to pinpoint the year of Peter's death based only upon Eusebius' evidence — or the lack of it. That "Eusebius himself knows no more than what he says" is very likely, indeed. In *Church History*, he says Peter and Paul died under Nero and even that statement goes unproved. One might go so far as to ask if Eusebius really *knew* all that he *said* — especially when we reflect on his statement about Peter's coming to Rome in the reign of Claudius.

Eusebius as a historian was not without his faults. McGiffert calls attention to one of these in his introduction to Eusebius' work:

In the third place, severe censure must be passed upon our author for his carelessness and inaccuracy in matters of chronology. We should expect that one who had produced the most extensive chronological work that had ever been given to the world, would be thoroughly at home in that province, but in truth, his chronology is the most defective feature of his work. The difficulty is chiefly due to his inexcusable carelessness, we might almost say slovenliness, in the use of different and often contradictory sources of information. Instead of applying himself to the discrepancies, and endeavoring to reach the truth by carefully weighing the respective merits of the sources, or by testing their conclusions in so far as tests are possible, he adopts in many cases the results of both, apparently quite unsuspecting of the confusion consequent upon such a course. In fact, the critical spirit which actuates him in dealing with many other matters, seems to leave him entirely when he is concerned with

chronology; and instead of proceeding with the care and circumspection of an historian, he accepts what he finds with the unquestioning faith of a child. There is no case in which he can be convicted of disingenuousness, but at times his obtuseness is almost beyond belief. An identity of names, or a resemblance between events recorded by different authors, will often be enough to lead him all unconsciously to himself, into the most absurd and contradictory conclusions. [Arthur C. McGiffert, "The Life and Writing of Eusebius of Caesarea," *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1952), I, Chap. 3, 3, pp. 50-51.]

Therefore, let us not be too eager to have Eusebius decide for us, once and for all, the chronological questions of our study.

How Historical is Eusebius' History?

The sum of the matter is this: Eusebius' statements as to Peter going to Rome and later dying a martyr's death there under Nero in the year 67 or 68 (depending on which version of the *Chronicum* is cited) were seen by many — especially in earlier times — as *proof positive* that these facts were so, for they rested on the testimony of that great ecclesiastical historian.

But a closer examination shows:

1. that his statement regarding Peter's coming to Rome under Claudius is a palpable error that has not met the test of time, scholarship, or Biblical evidence;
2. that the sources he quotes for proofs of his assertion that Peter died under Nero err in the latter half of their testimony by saying Peter founded and planted the Roman church, which testimony runs contrary to Biblical truth;
3. that these same sources say *nothing* of Nero or the *time* or *manner* of Peter's death;
4. that these sources are both late and obscure;
5. that those sources closer to the actual events in time and location are not, and cannot be cited inasmuch as they do not substantiate the tradition that Peter died in Rome under Nero.

While we may acknowledge that Eusebius says Peter was crucified in Rome under Nero, it would surpass the bounds of credulity to state that Eusebius *proves* that important theological point, for the proof of that claim is sorely wanting. While recognizing fully the development of the *tradition* of Peter at Rome, this author would call attention to the absence of positive, historical evidence — *solid proof* — that the legend is true.

Lactantius and Jerome

The Latin writers of the fourth century round out the development of the Petrine tradition and are quoted below.

Lactantius (260-330), *Of the Manner in Which the Persecutors Died*:

His Apostles were at that time eleven in number, to whom were added Matthias, in the room of the traitor Judas, and afterwards Paul.

Then were they dispersed throughout all the earth to preach the Gospel, as the Lord their Master had commanded them; and during twenty-five years, and until the beginning of the reign of the Emperor Nero, they occupied themselves in laying the foundations of the Church in every province and city. And while Nero reigned, the Apostle Peter came to Rome, and, through the power of God committed unto him, wrought certain miracles, and, by turning many to the true religion, built up a faithful and stedfast temple unto the Lord. When Nero heard of those things, and observed that not only in Rome, but in every other place, a great multitude revolted daily from the worship of idols, and, condemning their old ways, went over to the new religion, he, an execrable and pernicious tyrant, sprung forward to raze the heavenly temple and destroy the true faith. *He it was who first persecuted the servants of God; he crucified Peter, and slew Paul:* nor did he escape with impunity; for God looked on the affliction of His people; and therefore the tyrant, bereaved of authority, and precipitated from the height of empire, suddenly disappeared, and even the burial-place of that noxious wild beast was nowhere to be seen. [Lactantius, *Of the Manner in Which the Persecutors Died*, trans. by William Fletcher (Vol. VII, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1951; pp. 301-302), Chap. 2.]

Jerome's statements on Peter in *Lives of Illustrious Men* differ slightly:

Simon Peter the son of John from the village of Bethsaida in the province of Galilee, brother of Andrew the Apostle, and himself chief of the Apostles, after having been bishop of the church of Antioch and having preached to the Dispersion — the believers in circumcision, in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia — *pushed on to Rome in the second year of Claudius to overthrow Simon Magus, and held the sacerdotal chair there for twenty-five years until the last, that is the fourteenth, year of Nero.* At his hands he received the crown of martyrdom being nailed to the cross with his head towards the ground and his feet raised on high, asserting that he was unworthy to be crucified in the same manner as his Lord Buried at Rome in the Vatican near the triumphal way he is venerated by the whole world. [Jerome, *Lives of Illustrious Men*, trans. by Ernest C. Richardson (Vol. III, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1953; p. 361), Chap. 1.]

And later speaking of *Paul*, Jerome adds, "He then in the fourteenth year of Nero *on the same day with Peter* was beheaded at Rome for Christ's sake and was buried in the Ostian way. [*Ibid.*, Chap. 5, p. 363.]

So we see that with Jerome we have the complete tradition. Now after the passing of over three centuries since the actual events, we are given all of the facts:

1. Peter came to Rome in the second year of Claudius to oppose Simon Magus;

2. He continued there twenty-five years until the fourteenth and last year of Nero;
3. He was crucified at Rome upside down at his own request;
4. He was martyred on the same day as the Apostle Paul.

This fourth point is uniquely Jerome's and makes for a nice closing embellishment to an oft-embellished story. One doubts that he had any more difficulty adding this final touch than any of the earlier writers had in sketching in the broader strokes of the Peter-in-Rome legend.

CHAPTER VIII Conclusions

We have examined the Biblical and literary record for evidence of the Apostle Peter at Rome. We have sought an authoritative, well-substantiated link with the actual events of the later life of the Apostle, but the search for footprints scarcely turns up shadows and, what was hoped to be proof, under careful examination proves to be little more than a clue.

The introduction to Foakes-Jackson's work draws an interesting comparison between the lives of the Apostles Peter and Paul:

St. Peter and St. Paul stand forth in solitary grandeur as the leaders of the ancient Church. To us, most of the Christian Apostolic leaders are but names. Peter and Paul are living men to this day. But Paul's is the easier life to write, and the attempts to do so have been innumerable. We can trace the journeys of this indefatigable missionary from one city of antiquity to another; we can be thrilled by the adventures of his varied career; we can read his letters, and feel after the interval of centuries the influence of his personality. *When we come to Peter it is otherwise. Till we examine the records we imagine that we know him; but experience only makes our actual knowledge diminish.* We are amazed to discover that so little real information has survived regarding the man whom Jesus chose as the leader of the Twelve Apostles, who subsequently appears as their chief in the foundation of the Christian Church at Jerusalem, and also in the earliest preaching of the Gospel to the Gentiles. *It must strike every student that, whereas the unanimous voice of the Church from the first acknowledges and reverences St. Peter as the founder of the Roman Church, when we search for a strictly historic proof of even his having ever visited Rome, we have to acknowledge that it is wanting.* [F.J. Foakes-Jackson, *Peter: Prince of Apostles* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1927), p. vii.]

Competent and learned scholars make such admissions, yet it is interesting to note how many find the tradition attractive nonetheless. "It is difficult to suppose that so large a body of tradition has no foundation in fact" is the way the escape clause usually reads. And while that may be true, it does not constitute proof. Attractive conclusions, it must be remembered, can be false. And there may be explanations beyond the obvious.

All this is *not* to say that Peter *never* was at Rome for the evidence, while not supplying proof for the positive, does not give us grounds for so negative a conclusion

either. The author does not seek to prove that Peter was never at Rome nor even that he may have died there, for those are both possibilities. This thesis does seek to show, however, a thorough examination of the available evidence that there is *no positive proof linking Peter with Rome*.

The burden of proof is upon those who make weighty claims about Peter's life and death in that city, and use those claims as the authority for the foundation of a great religion. To show that those claims are not well-founded and historically proved, is sufficient.

Tradition or Theory?

Some will still argue that we must in some way account for the tradition. But do we, in fact, have a *genuine tradition*? Ramsay challenges that fact in his work, *The Church in the Roman Empire*. After reviewing the evidence (particularly Clement's ordination by Peter) and suggesting that Peter may have lived beyond the time of Nero, he writes:

The tradition that he [Peter] died under Nero is not a real tradition, but an *historical theory*, framed at the time when the recollection of the true relations between the State and the Christians had perished
[W. M. Ramsay, *The Church in the Roman Empire* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1893), pp. 283-284.]

A true tradition? No. An "historical theory"? Yes! That is a good way to describe what we see evolve before our eyes in the record of Peter at Rome.

But who would have framed such a theory? And why? Perhaps an equally good word would be "explanation." Who would have devised such an explanation and why?

Need for Peter in Rome?

Could it be that there was a definite *need* for such an explanation or theory on the part of some? If so, this would account for the fact that the evidence all goes one way. Perhaps what we have is not a true tradition, the original details of which are revealed one by one with the turn of the centuries, but rather an explanation, justification, or "theory" that goes in the name of fact, the details being safely added long after the true facts had been lost or forgotten.

In the literary evidence we may not be witnessing a true tradition coming to light, but a false legend being created because of the need for such a fable.

What if only *one Peter* had ever been in Rome after the establishment of a religious tradition based on his stay there? And what if time and circumstances proved him to be an imposter — a Simon *the Magician* who took to himself the name Peter? Would there not then immediately rise the *need* to find at Rome a *true Peter* upon whom to rest that tradition if it was to be perpetuated? False religious leaders of that early period may have been eager to make their theory fit the facts rather than acknowledge that their authority stemmed from the *wrong Peter*.

The point of setting forth this possibility is not to prove that such a dark conspiracy took place, but to offer a possible explanation for the evolving Petrine tradition. While such a legend may have had its original roots in truth, we must also allow that they may have been just as deeply rooted in error. And while the literary evidence may have been set forth as helpful additions to a true story, they may also have been added by men

who were *strongly motivated* to preserve what was already in their day a well-established religious system.

Failure to discover a true apostle of God named Peter in the city which became the seat of their activities would have proved fatal, which is to say that theirs may have been *the best kept secret of the ages!*

We know, if only from the contradictions, that not all of the story is true. Other portions can be proved to be false. If *all* of the facts were known, is it possible that the entire theory would prove a *monumental hoax* spawned about the time of the outpouring of the apocryphal literature, the middle of the second century, or before?

Biblical and literary scholarship has demonstrated that we must not be gullible and unsuspecting. "Prove all things," we are exhorted, "hold fast that which is good" (**I Thes. 5:21**).

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